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ABSTRACT

The artistic quality of creativity is not unique to artists but is carried out more skillfully by those who are artists than by those who are not. The artist participates with the rest of humanity in the essential part of creativity, communication, and develops a consonance--a resonance--between the work of art and the audience. The ritual of public worship (liturgy) is one expression of the art of drama in which the audience is a participant. (TJ)

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The Theater as Liturgy
by Roger G. Kennedy

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Mr. Kennedy is vice president for the Arts, the Ford Foundation. This address, the Ernest Blythe Memorial Lecture, was delivered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland, on November 12, 1978.

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Soon after I was recast at the Ford Foundation, from the role of Scrooge (vice president for financial affairs) to that of Siegfried (vice president for the arts), I was persuaded by my new colleagues to make a call on a "great man of the theater" who now sits like the dragon Fafnir, guarding the Creative Process. I was callow, perhaps not so pure as Parsifal but just as unwary. As I recall it, I whistled a tune on a snowy morning, blithe in the winter sunlight, I passed unwitting the bleached bones of previous visitors.

I entered the dragon's den and immediately offered a consummate example of conversational infelicity. "Sir—," said I, beaming with good cheer, "I'm glad to meet you because I admire your work and because it sounds as if some of our money and some of our ideas may have been of use to you. It gives us a sense of partnership, which we cherish." It was inept, it was pretentious. It was disastrous—it was dragonbait. The great man uncoiled himself from his chair, raised himself up, fixed me with a bloody eye, and let me have it.

A half hour later, as I was feeling about in the snowbank outside for my glasses (which ultimately turned up inside the one overshoe I found), I recalled some of the major hypotheses of the derisive dissertation that had expelled me from his premises, rather in the way the beneficiary of an avalanche recalls the shape and color of some of the rocks.

"Non-artists," he told me, "should not presume to partnership with artists." In particular, money-providers should not think themselves transmogrified into the same

genus as the artists they support merely because hands touch in the act of transmitting the cash. There are, he made it clear, two orders of being: the first, a few creative artists, and, a poor and distant second, the rest of mankind, which has the function of offering praise and provender and consuming the artistic product.

My dazed and jostled imagination was grasping for a new vision, offered by him. It was not the old image of the world as a boat. No, not Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*, not Tallulah Bankhead in *Lifeboat*, nor Noah, in the Ark, and still not quite Buckminster Fuller in Spaceship Earth... something in between. Ah, yes,! a transatlantic airplane. In back, the audience forever in steerage. In front, behind a curtain, permitting passage of tantalizing aromas and sounds like popping corks or the whoosh of a souffle being spooned... in front, life's natural elect, the creative artists.

It is not strange that such an image of things should lurk implicit in the discourse of even so celebrated, elevated, and compensated an artist as the Great Man. He was, despite some opinions to the contrary, human. Like us all, he sought some small differentiating elegance a little above the rabble. We all want some external mark set upon us to confirm what we feel to be true: that we are singular, and significant. Such a significance may arise merely from living in those precincts of society which for a hundred and fifty years or so have been called the arts. It is a great convenience to be able to find in this location, of itself, distinction.

But though artists are fond of it, and state it ever so well, invidious vocation has no more lasting effect upon one's self-esteem than a hundred other taxonomic devices such as race or religion, wealth or family name, sign of the zodiac, or place of birth. They all fail us in the end, for within each of these compartments excellent persons— like us— keep be-

ing jostled by so many dolts and villians, who embarrass our race, religion, income-tax-bracket, family name, sign, venue, and vocation.

But the respect due the artist does not, I think, arise from any unique association of his craft to that tattered tag "creative."

It is past time to be rid of the pernicious notion that creativity is an attribute only of artists, or, indeed, only of anybody. The peculiar form that notion was given by the Romantic Era has estranged many who think themselves non-artists. They have come to feel art is not serious but they are, that art is ornamental and other things are central, that, by George, if they are not creative, then creativity is not for them. On the other hand, it has indulged among artists much foolishness. It is time we got away from this notion by finding again the pathway well-known to the ancient Greeks and to the medieval church and now being reopened for us by modern physics.

To find it we must seek a way through a narrow passage, where awaits our first adversary, full in the sunlight, armoured in silver-gilt, the artist-hero of the Renaissance. So dazzling does he appear that even so wise a man as the psychiatrist, Erich Neumann, has seen him "like the hero of the myth" doing battle with the drab "dominant values" of the work-a-day world.

This image of artist as Superman, contending against the hosts of error, a composite of Beethoven and Cyrano de Bergerac, is a quite recent invention. It does not appear in the aesthetics of Plato or Aristotle. It apparently arrived, four or five hundred years ago, together with the Renaissance ideas of "genius" and of "glory."

Somewhat later what had been heroic in the Renaissance became something a little less strenuous. In the Romantic Era all artists did not profess to be heaven-stormers. They might just be unable or unwilling to tolerate the close, polluted air of the new industrial

cities and the shoddy behavior of the bourgeoisie.

George Sand spoke for many artists and rebels in the 1830s (as well as the 1960s) when she said:

> "To be an artist! Yes, I wanted to be one, not only to escape from the material jail where property, large or small, imprisons us in a circle of odious little preoccupations, but to isolate myself from the control of opinion...to live away from the prejudices of the world."

De Musset had the same feeling. For him French society was of "two camps: on one side, the exalted, suffering spirits, all the expansive souls who have need of the infinite... On the other side are the men of flesh, inflexible in the midst of material possessions, and they have no other concern than counting their money."

Some romantics, then, were not sure how heroic they wanted to be, how much they intended to assault the heavens or transform the earth. They were more likely to scuttle away toward some tasteful cottage on a smiling lawn, some exurban dacha, where they could nurse their sensibilities apart from what Tocqueville feared in America and saw in France, "a land of dumb conformity." He agreed with Stendhal that "democracy of necessity introduces the reign of the mediocre, rational, narrow-minded and dull people."

A statement like that issuing from intelligent men who had close experience with the reigns of kings as "mediocre...narrow-minded and dull" as those after Louis XIV were can only be explained as arising from a passion to believe something, a passion so irresistible as to overwhelm experience, skepticism, and even humor. What they wanted to believe was that liveliness— even creativeness— is limited to artists. We cannot afford to be swept into their error, in part because it makes "artist" too big a word, too

general, too inclusive, to help us distinguish among the roles that artists, though not uniquely creative, *do* play in our society.

Many artists are, indeed, not active opponents of the main qualities of their times. Many do act prophetically, or as balancing agents, or as necessary irritants. But many artists are not given to opposition. Some, as we have seen, simply secede from society, to go into the desert, onto the mountaintop or, if prudent in the selection of grandparents, on remittance to the Riviera. They stand not in conflict with, but simply apart from, dominant values.

Other, very great artists are exemplars of dominant values, bringing to them the highest possible refinement and felicity of expression. One thinks of Giotto or Raphael or Rubens, or perhaps imagines Homer. Still other artists are neither *consciously* in conflict with, nor *consciously* celebratory of, the "dominant values" of their time. They may be so completely in harmony with their place and time that it does not occur to them to do other than use hand and voice to make the most beautiful and useful things they can. Some do not think of themselves as artists at all, but extend gesture into dance and speech into poetry, intensifying commonplace ways of expression unselfconsciously into new understanding of persons and apprehension of things.

Creative People

There are many roles for art and artists in society. One of the noblest is to help us apprehend afresh the creative achievements of the many, taken one by one. I shall labor this point because a miscalibration of the gap between artists, and all the rest is bad for art, bad for artists, and bad for civilization. It fixes a gulf between artist and society. It permits the artist to regard himself as unappreciated when he is merely uncommunicative. And its deadly pall prevents that incandescence

which can occur when there is mutual respect between artist and audience.

The wise and eloquent Welsh historian and novelist, Raymond Williams, in his book, *The Long Revolution,* has helped us to close the gap between the artist and audience, helping us to understand how modern science has established that the audience (that is, all of us), has earned that grand encomium "creative." Williams has shown us that the "we/they" distinction between creators and consumers flies in the face of a century of scientific discovery, and, I would add, seventy years of analytic psychology.

Williams brings to us the words of the biologist, J.Z. Young: "the brain of each one of us literally creates his or her own world." Each of us takes the stuff our senses capture and makes of it a unique world of his own creation.

Our senses are not mere recording instruments; our eyes are not cameras. Young says that "Contrary to what we might suppose, the eyes and brain do not simply record in a sort of photographic manner the pictures that pass in front of us. The brain is not by any means a simple recording system like a film." We do receive messages from outside our skin, but those messages are sorted out, some refused, some accepted, and then combined by each of us into his own reality.

The creative act, taking sensory data and making a reality of it, is as ordinary as breathing. Yet it is an enormous accomplishment, and it is the necessary precondition to the more specialized integrating of material, catalyzed by consciousness, that is the beginning of artistic creation. Williams says, "We are in the habit of miracle making, and think little of it. When we do think about it, plan it, and display the process to others we are on the way to art. But before we get there it is worth repeating that our habitual forming of reality is a miracle—a continuous miracle

of creation, undertaken by all humans from birth to death."

Each of us makes his own reality. We "remake ourselves" to include what we experience. Then, each time we communicate by voice or gesture, each of us seeks to induce others to recognize our reality and to accept some part of it in their own. We do this when we communicate, whether or not we call it art. Rilke, who sang to be understood, as did Homer and later bards, spoke of this opening out, this inducement and exposure to others, this asking to receive our reality into their reality, when he said, "Song is existence!" This is because, as Raymond Williams says:

> "Communication is the process of making unique experience into common experience and it is, above all, the *claim to live*. The ability to live in a particular way depends, ultimately, on acceptance of this experience by others, in successful communication."

A "claim to live" says the Welshman; and it was Oliver St. John Gogarty who said, "We must all sing our own Magnificats or go mad." We cannot live among others, as sane persons, unless our claim is accepted, unless our song is heard. "Song is existence!" Now we can see what art is— it is intense and successful communication. The great artist is one who has successfully integrated his experience (and the experience carried in his genes) and then gives his whole energy to describe it and transmit it to others. Williams says, rightly, I think, that "Bad art is then the failure, either to integrate this experience or to transmit it... It is not a question of 'inspired' or 'uninspired' transmission to a passive audience." Art is "an offering of experience." The creative audience accepts the offering, and, as Walt Whitman reminded Americans, "great poets need great audiences."

The fact that all of us integrate experience and communicate some of it, all the time,

unifies us all in a common achievement. It is well to admire those who do it very well. They are exceptionally skillful at some of the things each of us achieves well enough to live, day by day. Perhaps it was something like this that led William Blake to insist that he "claimed the possession of some powers, only in a greater degree than all men possessed, and which they undervalued in themselves..."

The everyday experience of new understanding, which occurs in the streets and fields, and the transmission of that intense new meaning when eyes or hands meet, is not, of course, so grand and public an act of creation as painting the Sistine Chapel or performing in Hamlet. But, the interaction is what matters—intense experience, integration, and communication, which creates another intense experience and another integration.

This interaction is wonderful—and a part of that even more mysterious interaction of which science has, of late, been instructing us. Consider, for example, the Heisenberg Principle, which asserts that the object scrutinized in a scientific experiment is affected by the process of scrutiny. Ordinary people know that we deepen a pool by thrusting a measuring stick into it because we displace water and force the surface upward to accommodate it. We also know every time we test a piece of fruit by pressing it, we change it. We can wake someone when we ask, "Are you asleep?" But now we know too, that we not only interact with each other, we interact with reality. We create our own reality out of the stuff of the world, all the time, and the world then becomes a new reality. The very air we breathe returns altered to the universe from its residency in our lungs. We create—by learning. We change the world. We are grand creatures—all of us. Artists help us to know how grand.

Creativity, science and ordinary observation tell us, is common. It is not the special

province of the artist. The fact is cause for celebration among artists.

Great Bronze Vessels

The erasure of a false distinction between "creative" artist and "non-creative" or "normal people" releases the artist from his prison. It invites a comradeship in art among professionals and amateurs—and it can happen. Let me offer an example of the creative interrelationship of artist and audience. It was suggested by the great voice teacher, Kristin Linklater, who told me that at Epidaurus and other Greek theaters, there were placed among the audience bronze vessels that were tuned to the primary intervals of the human voice and its overtones, so that when certain sounds were pronounced on stage the vessels would vibrate and send those sounds toward the heavens and throughout the valley, filling, indeed, "the wide vessel of the universe." This is what happens in an audience when it is tuned to action on stage, when playwright, director, actors, and audience respect each other.

There is joy in heaven when a stage is animated by an eager sense of the miracles latent in the audience. The energy arcs like lightning back and forth—the actors trust and risk, the audience trusts and risks, and the great bronze vessels resonate in a litany of trust. Otherwise, the action on stage may be picturesque, the dialogue clever, the acting virtuosic, but nothing happens. The sympathy of the audience is held back behind an invisible screen like the glass window to a broadcasting studio. It is as if a wall had been put up between the presumed artists and the presumed non-artists. The great bronze vessels cannot be reached by sympathetic sound, they stand silent, rendered voiceless by snobbery.

But, when there is consonance in a theater, its resonance, like the probing instrument of the scientist, affects the universe. That is

what the Greeks believed, and I believe it, too. It begins by affecting the audience, which participates in the particular action on the stage, and thereby participates more generally in the myth enacted. Those broad themes, those "universals" which Aristotle honored, might be said to accord with archetypal patterns.

It is true that Hamlet kills his mother's husband, and Oedipus kills his father; they act in anger and in character. But their action is also part of a much larger and more deliberate rhythm. That rhythm, of course, includes that complex observed by Freud and Ernest Jones, but more broadly, I think, its power is felt because the insidious, lascivious, murderous Claudius and the heedless Laius are exemplars of all unworthy authorities, all tyrants, all baneful law, and all the smiling villiany of unjust power.

The hero acts for all of us, as the artist speaks for all of us, not because he is unique but because of all we share with him. A great dramatist can trust his audience to recognize the ambiguities, the hesitancies, and the manifest imperfections of the true tragic hero—and thereby become emboldened to share the hero's grandeur.

The audience, the trusted audience, knows that heroic choices are not to be made in single spasms, but in a long lifetime's choosing and finally at great cost. Hamlet loses his life in his final action. Oedipus, in re-creation of an epiphany in the history of the human psyche, lays away all worldly power and destroys his ability even to see the world—he takes out his own eyes, and becomes utterly dependent upon the guidance of a child, a female child. That terrible self-inflicted pain, that abdication of a kingdom, that abnegation of the power to see—outwardly—was not a sentence meted out to him. It was his own choice, a choice expressed in a cry of pain—mankind's pain.

The Greek audience, again and again,

heard the hollow bronzes take up the cry uttered by Oedipus at his blinding, and sent it forth resounding from hill to hill in brazen thunder rounding the earth from hill to sky and back again. The sound is with us still.

There is such a moment in many lives. There was such a moment in the life of our species when conscious choice first shattered the old unconsidered way of existence. Re-enacted in Oedipus' decision to mete out justice to himself, it altered the structure of the universe, and it can alter the life of a person in an audience who enters fully into that sacred action. In that creative act, each of us takes the action on stage and makes it part of his own life.

Science tells us we do not simply record and assimilate externals. Subject and object determine each other. We and the universe form a continuity of interaction. When the playwright's act of creation, in writing, is extended into the act of creation in performance and into the act of creation in participation—the angels smile. A great play, or any great work of art, transmutes the person who receives it by the full intention of that person's will and spirit. The passage of energy between the trusting audience and the respectful artist becomes incandescent when it also passes through the field of force established by a great myth, when it enacts an archetype. Then the artist, audience, and archetype sound at once. Among the Greeks, the story of Oedipus permitted such a moment. Among Hebrews, the story of Job permitted such a moment. We do not know whether or not *Oedipus* is history as well as drama. We know that Holy Week observances are, and among Christians, the memory of the events of Holy Week permits such moments. Medieval plays about those events, and even such a modern play as *Murder in the Cathedral*, offer the same occasion as did *Oedipus* or *Job*—something like the opportunity of being present at the events themselves. It is also,

again, an opportunity to alter the shape of reality itself.

There are great events that change things, and have the power to change things again each time they resonate in the tuned vessels of the psyche.

In this very special sense, the recollection of such events in the ritual of public worship, or liturgy, is drama, and, in fact, the sanctuary of the medieval church was intended to be a stage. It was the scene of mystery plays enacted to illustrate the liturgy. Just as stained or painted glass gave form and color to the words of Scripture, plays gave them sound and motion. In the liturgy the congregation participated in what really was an "illuminated manuscript." In its light, the arts helped all those present perceive its meaning.

The very shape and order of Shakespeare's plays come from an extension of that depicted and enacted liturgy. They were the outgrowth of dramas in which the processions at first moved from scene to scene only inside the church. Then portions of the drama were played outside, as the processions moved throughout the town, including the community geographically, and, finally, socially, too, as each trade took upon itself an aspect of the sacred observance, playing out its part of the story.

We no longer enjoy so organically unified a community—but even in *our* theater, trust and mutual respect between artists and audience are of great importance. Much of the same themes are played, though we use secular terms to describe them. On entering a theater we still observe a sort of ritual cleansing from the world, like leaving one's shoes at the door. Now we do it with light: after the audience files into a lighted space, and settles itself, you can almost hear the sigh when the lights go down. Then each member of the audience is free to enter into the magic, safe from the scrutiny of his neighbors. Each can commence to share a dream in the darkness,

to share without embarrassment, to trust, to risk. Each can live that dream safely without revealing the feelings it evokes.

As in sleep, the doors of the unconscious can open. A deep current of ancient memory and passionate belief come forth. Up there, on the stage, the actions we wish or fear are played out. In the warm darkness, unobserved, we, too, experience them—safely—as if before birth, still warm and safe in the womb, we could experience what life would be.

Darkness and anonymity permit the audience to share strong emotions, and to respond. If the playwright and the actors trust in the creativity of the audience, the players will feel energy coming back to them, which emboldens them to take risks, and to give more energy back.

Thus the drama unifies the players and the audience. Thus, audiences have participated in the rhythms of man's life and the seasons of the earth's life. I have suggested how Elizabethan drama grew out of a sacred liturgy, an extended liturgy that assumed that all the community participated in the action. There are many causes of the subsequent decline of drama as a central institution in a community: seventeenth century puritan anxieties; the class consciousness of the Restoration; nineteenth century encounters between artists full of romantic notions of special creativity and a middle class so unsure of its footing that it could only aspire to be "productive," never "creative." It is time we put all that behind us. It is time we reclaimed the right to play, for all, to dance, for all, to sing, for all. Rilke was right: singing *is* existence. Gogarty was right: we must all sing our own Magnificats, or go mad. Art is invitation, exhortation, example, a beckoning gesture—song! That is why art matters—it is the distillation of being human.

Humanity is not so much a condition as it is a process. The name of that process is Art.